

Organic Farming: A Solution Story

By most estimates, sales of organically labeled products represented about 2% of our nation's food economy in 2004. This means that America's consumers spent about eleven *billion* on certified organic products. This is especially significant when one realizes that twenty years ago the organic economy probably amounted to less than \$100 *million*. Today, America's organic farmers provide us with just about everything from asparagus to zucchini, milk to cotton, beef to flowers.

Farmers have made the transition to organic production systems for any number of reasons: environmental protection, avoiding dangerous pesticides, and the high quality of organically grown products all fit into the mix. But let's face it, the primary reason is the public's ever-expanding commitment to pay the real cost for the food they eat. Simply put: more consumer demand equals more organic acreage, and more organic farmers.

We estimate that as many as 10,000 organic farmers -- the vast majority sole proprietors or family farmers -- will plant and harvest their organic acreage in 2005. They will do so to sell directly to consumers and also into an ever expanding market of processing and wholesale operations. Consumer surveys identify taste, freshness and health benefits as the primary reasons more consumers are purchasing certified organic food.

But more must be done. The organic economy has expanded, despite any identifiable institutional or governmental support. Our nation's 69 agricultural university research institutions have only 496 certified organic research acres out of an estimated 886,000 available research acres. Congress has appropriated only \$3.5 million of our total \$1 billion Agricultural Research Service (ARS) budget for organic research -- a mere 0.35 percent. At a minimum, since organic food currently represents 2 percent of our food economy, organic farmers should

receive 2 percent of our land-grant and governmental-agricultural resources. We call it a fair-share standard for organic family farmers.

One place where we can generate additional resources for organic farmers is in Congress, where our representatives debate and determine our food and farming policies. Using the "fair-share" standard as a benchmark, Congress should appropriate \$18 million annually for ARS research. But that's not enough. We need more farmers transitioning to organic production systems as well.

Everyone knows that farming isn't easy. Leaving conventional agriculture for an organic farming system -- one that may take three or four years to achieve certified organic status -- requires a quantum leap of faith in one's own farming and marketing skills, a new network of information sources, and the support of one's neighbors who may not understand your change of heart. Some might define such a leap of faith as a "paradigm shift," while others imagine a perfect ear of organic sweet corn on a hot summer's day.

Suffice it to say, we know "organic" when we verify, see, and taste it. Consumers have created an opportunity for change in our nation's heartland. And family farmers, both young and old, are responding accordingly. There may be no other story where the power of one individual's shopping list can have so much of an impact on the very fabric of our rural culture and heritage. Personal responsibility goes a long way. Make your shopping list an organic one and bring the future of farming into your kitchen today.

Bob Scowcroft -- Organic Farming Research Foundation

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